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Literature and Medicine, Volume 32, Number 2, Fall 2014, pp. 277-298  
(Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press  
DOI: 10.1353/lm.2014.0027



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# Conversing with Some Chickadees: Cautious Acts of Ontological Translation

Amba J. Sepie

Some old-timers, men who became famous for their powers and skills, had been great dreamers. Hunters and dreamers. They did not hunt as most people do now. They did not seek uncertainly for the trails of animals whose movements we can only guess at. No, they located their prey in dreams, found their trails, and made dream-kills. Then, the next day, or a few days later, whenever it seemed auspicious to do so, they could go out, find the trail, re-encounter the animal, and collect the kill.

—Hugh Brody, *Maps and Dreams: Indians and the British Colombia Frontier*, 1981<sup>1</sup>

The Chickadee-person is a good listener. Nothing escapes his ears, which he has sharpened by constant use. Whenever others are talking together of their successes, there you will find the Chickadee-person listening to their words." Becoming a chickadee, then, is a virtue—a form of human excellence . . . "The chickadee is big medicine," Pretty-Shield told her interviewer.

—Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*, 2006<sup>2</sup>

During the 1970s, when Hugh Brody was recording descriptions of *dreamhunting* practices among the Beaver Indians in the Northwestern territories of Canada, it seemed reasonable that, within a relatively short time, academics would catch up with the social changes wrought during the revolutionary decade of the 1960s.<sup>3</sup> Working anthropologists such as Brody and newly emerging indigenous academics such as Vine Deloria, Jr. were presenting radical scholarship with the assumption that many cultural, gendered, sexual, political, religious, and geographical

inequalities would eventually be overcome and a common sense recognition of the legitimacy of other worldviews would emerge.

Unfortunately, that didn't happen. Indigenous academics working on behalf of their own peoples around the globe are still striving for recognition within a climate of limited and partisan hospitality, and only in the wake of blows delivered by a long line of feminist, black, indigenous, and pedagogical scholars.<sup>4</sup> Part of the issue is that the radical alterity posited by people such as dreamhunters, spirit talkers, and others claims a place for the existence of an other-than-human reality which is as fully valid as Western ways of thinking, being, and doing. Not only this, but the stories (and the demand that they be heard) are told and re-told to ethnographers who are then challenged with the task of finding how and where these radical breaks with accepted "rationality" might be accommodated within an often selective and exclusive academic discipline.

Brody's predecessor, Frank Bird Linderman (more a cowboy and native enthusiast with a talent for writing than a trained anthropologist), went to the Crow Nation, among other groups, in the early twentieth century to gather "quaint" autobiographical folktales and origin stories told by Native informants from what was thought to be a disappearing culture.<sup>5</sup> Linderman is best known for his work on *Plenty Coups* and *Pretty-shield: Medicine Woman of the Crows*.<sup>6</sup> Pretty-shield was an elderly woman he interviewed in the 1920s; the latter book was illustrated and perhaps meant for children, as it was dedicated to his granddaughter.<sup>7</sup> In it Linderman records anecdotes, moments from Pretty-Shield's childhood, and stories in which she effortlessly blends the more regular aspects of daily life with interludes where people not only speak with animals but are sometimes so intertwined with them that they are "chickadee-persons" or "woman-mice." Pretty-shield is very aware of the contradictions between her worldview and Linderman's; Linderman quotes her as saying "reproachfully," "'Ahhh, you have written down my words. . . . If you put them in a book nobody who can read will believe them; and yet they only tell the truth.'"<sup>8</sup> Truth for Pretty-shield and truth for Frank Linderman, however, are words with very different meanings and cultural contexts. For Pretty-shield, to *know it happened* is enough, as the relation between knowledge and the *integrity* of that knowledge is codified within her Crow worldview in a manner she clearly recognizes as foreign to Linderman. Brian Swann, writing on incommensurable worldviews and translation, notes: "What Westerners regard as 'myth,' which carries a sense of 'fabrication,' a traditional native person might regard as a

true account. . . . The translator needs to draw on many resources to present such a universe convincingly.”<sup>9</sup>

This essay explores the challenges and the promise offered by the task of translation between Euroamerican and Native cosmologies, ontologies, and worldviews. It traces how insufficient hospitality toward Native cultures and a failure to examine the cosmological presuppositions of the white, Western, secular academy have resulted in the obfuscation or denigration of Native ways of being and knowing. Attempts to assimilate Native knowledge into Euroamerican concepts of religion, medicine, or culture have fallen short precisely because of the incommensurability of Western disciplinary formations with Native worldviews—worldviews that do not privilege subject-object relations or linear views of time. What is more, the very languages through which Native storytellers and Euroamerican scholars approach one another are freighted with assumptions about the validity of narrative and what makes an utterance “true.” Since Native ways of being are often expressed through story, Western scholars must interrogate their own assumptions about narrative and adopt, explicitly and self-consciously, a model of scholarship that embraces translation at the level not only of speech but also of ontology.

Debating the legitimacy of indigenous ways of knowing is quite a different endeavor than deciding they are legitimate *a priori* and then figuring out how they relate, or don’t, to modern Western ways of thinking about the world. It is the latter task that remains urgent, in accordance with Sami scholar Rauna Kuokkanen’s ethic of hospitality, which requires a commitment to responsibility and openness toward the “other.” Her argument is that the Academy “cannot grasp or even hear views that are grounded in other epistemic [knowledge] conventions.”<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, “Many indigenous people contend that notwithstanding its rhetoric of welcome and hospitality, the academy is not a good host . . . with only a weak commitment to indigenous people.”<sup>11</sup> Her proposal is that scholars move beyond deliberating the terms of legitimacy, via comparisons between standards of truth, and instead innovate different philosophical and practical methodologies for regarding indigenous ways of seeing as intellectually and socially valuable. The argument here is that the form of hospitality she is calling for requires a deeper kind of *cosmological interrogation* by scholars; that is, a self-reflexive endeavor or inquiry into key charter myths and classificatory systems that makes translation between different worldviews possible.

With this in mind, the method suggested in this essay involves multiple reflections on *translation*. Cultural translation is the translation of a worldview into a narrative that can be understood outside of a specific cultural context. If the story of Pretty-shield, which is nearing one hundred years old, is considered together with Kuokkanen's urgent request for hospitality, it becomes evident just how far scholarship has, or has not, progressed in the interim.

Ethnographies are stories about people which are true—but “true” only inasmuch as the sources and recorders are considered reliable according to particular truth standards. Indeed, the very discipline charged with the task of understanding the “other” appears to be short on the means to intellectually incorporate what scholars find in the field, and is further afflicted with a dubious history of romanticism, exoticism, and Eurocentrism. As Christine Colasurdo writes, “Scholars today generally accept the fact that early Euro-American anthropologists, trained in a fledgling discipline, carried out to the field a suitcase full of cultural biases.”<sup>12</sup> That recognition does not automatically grant non-Euroamerican anthropologists prominence in the discipline, however. It is still too easy to ignore scholars who are themselves at the margins, studying people at the margins who hold marginalized ideas: to dismiss ethnographers or selective parts of an account as simply “what people believe.”

Indeed, academic ways of knowing have proved very capable of reducing complex cultural realities and experiences into tidy accounts of knowledge. These accounts are organized most often as sub-areas of the larger categories of “religion” or “culture.” For instance, traditionally, from the perspective of Euroamerican scholars, when animals speak or when old men dream a kill, the narratives told have been classified as fable, fiction, myth, story, or folktale.<sup>13</sup> Folklorists working on the edges of academic respectability have collected such stories like treasures or relics; over time their findings have been classified as “narrative” and thereby as unreliable content, from unreliable sources, recorded by unreliable scholars. Such stories appear in anthropology merely as context for “hard” data, and are truly analyzed only in literary or religious studies. (This last arrangement is unfortunate, for as Sam Gill points out, “The academic study of religion . . . is academic; it is Western; it is intellectual.”<sup>14</sup>)

“Culture” fares no better than religion in that it is a multi-layered point of reference that academics often only gesture toward. The term and concept of “religion” in particular seems to have become a clearinghouse for anything “non-scientific,” including all things invisible

or those which involve powers or forces falling within the catchment of "culture."

Culture and religion are Euroamerican terms that do not hospitably relate indigenous lived realities, and are in fact often incommensurate with indigenous worldviews. They do not, for example, resolve the issues presented by diverse cosmologies; any claim for beings or entities embedded within local landscapes are automatically relegated, from this standpoint, to the category of "having a religion." However, as Jace Weaver writes, "Traditional Native religions are integrated totally into daily activity. They are ways of life and not sets of principles or credal formulations."<sup>15</sup> The concept of a religious "other" is well-suited to the purposes of maintaining relations of power inherited from colonialism; both religion and culture remain part of a larger reference set from a single, dominant intellectual tradition which continues to reinforce these relations. Colin Scott states that, "we may be largely unconscious of the metaphysical paradigms that underlie our own understandings of the world, while those of other knowledge traditions strike us as exotic, improbable, even 'superstitious.'"<sup>16</sup> If, in colloquial terms, knowledge is power—a commonly expressed but significant axiom in contemporary society—then what is required is a recognition of the metaphysical scaffolding that supports and sustains the knowledge-value relationships influencing how Native understandings of the world are read.

#### Multiple Versions of the World(s): Indigenous Metaphysics and Meanings

To privilege a certain metaphysical understanding regarding the nature of humans, the world, experiences, and so forth, whether Christian, Western, Native, or Other, is to consider *ontology*, the study of what can exist, or what can possibly exist. Ontologies are generally unthought: we all have categories of being, or things we accept as existent in the world, but only dwell rarely on what these might be. Notions such as "fact," "truth," and "value" are derived from ontologies, however, so the analysis of ontological constructs within any cultural complex is very important.

Ontology is constituted from whatever cosmological tenets, origin stories, or charter myths guide a community; these demarcate not only what can happen and what can be, but also what is possible, what is reasonable, and what is rational. All of these, in turn, affect

behaviors, practices, norms, and the “action” of culture. For instance, under a Christian cosmology there can be no “unbound” spirits in the world—they cannot exist. The Christian cosmological framework is tightly controlled: spirits are either bound in human form or are “with God.” Conversely, in a secular scientific naturalist framework, all things in the world are ultimately materialistic in nature—there is nothing “spiritual” to be controlled. According to this cosmology, no unbridled spirits can exist or are possible, therefore they cannot be studied. As both cosmologies inform very directly what is possible, they are the primary determinants of their respective ontologies. What can be known (epistemology) and what has value (axiology) can be added to these concepts in order to map out a worldview.

The language that is representative of, or translates, a worldview is emergent from the relationships between these different philosophical areas. Language, both in how it originates (its etymology) and in how it is used, is as much a part of a worldview as any other cultural element, for the precise reason that it communicates ideas in local ways, with local inflections regarding meaning. Consider, for instance, the concept of medicine: on the surface, this single word serves to represent Native American and Euroamerican medicine as if they were the same entity. However, as F. David Peat asks, “just what is ‘medicine’ in Native context? A medicine person may refer to the herbs and plants in her bag as being medicine, but Native Americans will also say that a ceremony they attended, an experience they had, or the food they are eating is ‘good medicine.’”<sup>17</sup>

If what can be known about something (epistemology) is defined according to the limits of the guiding ontology—as designated by the overarching cosmological framework—and yet the words being used are mapped to *different* cosmological frameworks, then we must seek accommodations for representing different concepts with local referents. Any radical differences which can be identified at a cosmological-ontological level must be reconciled or interrogated further. This is the work of translation, which strives to relay and relate the ways of being of different peoples in the world without reducing them to a set of beliefs. It is achieved by being aware of and interrogating one’s *own* ontology simultaneously with that of the “other”—an effort too often hampered by the cosmological precept within Euroamerican thinking that ontological differences *must* be categorized as beliefs.

Religion and culture, like medicine, are problematic terms in that they are colloquially distributed as universals with multiple references, and yet are infused implicitly with post-Christian, Euroamerican

academic and popular baggage. Peat notes that a Native concept of medicine stretches the Western paradigm to its limit: as Christianity and science both reject the benevolent efficacy of spirits, the spirit quality of Native medicine becomes an untranslatable concept in any idiom that has internalized the ontological premises of Christianity. Spirits do not exist in the Euroamerican framework without also possessing the potential for dangerous acts.<sup>18</sup> Add to this the fact that the very processes of Christianization have also “involved some internalization of the larger illusion of Indian inferiority and the idealization of white culture and religion” and translation between worldviews becomes quite challenging, as many experts in translation between languages attest.<sup>19</sup> To translate between worldviews, or *cosmological* translation, is to find appropriate references which can carry meaning from one way of being in the world to another, without substantial loss of context—just as with language translation.<sup>20</sup>

To suggest that ontologies are singularly held, or exist in a binarized sense (such as Christian versus Native ways of being), would be an error: radically incommensurable worldviews can be held by a single individual simultaneously. This is sometimes called holding *plural contradictory commitments*. All modern people are raised with multiple versions of the world from which some approximation or negotiation of ideas, beliefs, and values is generally formed through socialization. All perspectives must bridge multiple worlds, as modern individuals are not raised monoculturally; nor does anyone inhabit a reality in which the realms of experience are neatly categorized into spheres such as religion, medicine, or culture. The key point here is that many indigenous worldviews are explicitly *interconnected*, and do not accord with the notion of distinct and bounded entities. This ontological formation is somewhat separate from how minds and worlds and persons are sometimes thought, and it must be held *alongside* the notion of individuality. A non-bounded worldview, similar to a non-bounded person or a non-bounded concept of culture, makes translation into a worldview replete with bounded entities (such as a Euroamerican one) extremely challenging.

Medicine, within this context, is not “just” religious or cultural knowledge, but neither is it the strict application of cure to illness. Within many indigenous worldviews, medicine is intertwined with an intuitive faculty, with the perception of the human being in a web of relations with community, nature, time, and the spirit of an individual as it “occurs” relative to, and within, these networks.<sup>21</sup> Doreen Martinez writes that a “social relations paradigm best encapsulates the way



Native Americans understand health, healing and medicine. . . . This paradigm involves an interconnection between building, maintaining and sustaining relationships, not just regarding health, but as an entire way of life in which healing is embedded."<sup>22</sup> This involves being alert to possibilities for information or communication that may happen during relations with people, things, dreams, and via intuitive faculties; these may take the form of warnings, advice, admonishments, or predictions. Since practices which might be economic, political, or ritual in nature are the activities of people in relationships with one another, other living species, and the cosmological order, medicine is whatever will mediate the health of these relationships.

Medicine, then, is one of the realms of human experience in which a more nuanced translation becomes most essential. Peat explains how differences in translation between two radically different kinds of medicine—Western and Native—might be understood: whereas the emphasis in English (and most other European languages of the same family) is on the noun, the emphasis in most indigenous languages is on the verb; thus, "when in English we speak of 'medicine' we automatically seek a referent, a substance, an object, something tangible, something that can be conceptualized. But suppose we begin with something verbal, with activity, process, [or] movement."<sup>23</sup> The boundaries that apply to persons-as-subjects, including the boundaries generally ascribed to temporal and spatial locations, and the movement of information across these boundaries, are profoundly altered by shifting to a verb-based map for communication in which boundaries are less tightly controlled. In real terms, this means that persons and objects exist as "things" only within a particular context, with a shifting metaphysical status and named only in accordance with that context. It is the action or state (flowing, speaking, angry), and not the noun (river), which determines identity.

According to this rubric, personhood is also rendered differently, reflecting the concept that in many indigenous contexts health is not transacted just between human individuals. For the Euroamerican individual (including indigenous persons enculturated with Euroamerican thinking), the residues of the Cartesian split, the species divide, and the long-reaching influences of Christian tripartite dogma cut people off from one another and the environment. The modern "person" is isolated, inhabiting a very private space of the mind and self that has been sometimes characterized as egocentric, differentiated, bounded, and autonomous.<sup>24</sup> "So embedded are the Cartesian myths of the dualities of mind-body, culture-nature," Colin Scott writes, "that we tend to privilege

models of physical causality, rather than relations of consciousness and significance, in our perception even of sentient nature."<sup>25</sup> Conversely, the Cree, for example, "assume common connections among people, animals, and other entities while exploring the nature of their differences. . . . In Cree, there is no word corresponding to our term 'nature.' There is a word *pimaatisiwin* (life), which includes human as well as animal 'persons.' The word for 'person,' *iyyiyuu*, can be glossed as 'he lives.' Humans, animals, spirits, and several geophysical agents are perceived to have qualities of personhood."<sup>26</sup> For Cree, as with many indigenous communities, kinship between what are commonly referred to as "all our relations" is thought of as symmetrical and reciprocal and is not generally based on bounded distinctions between people, animals, objects, or elements of the natural world.<sup>27</sup>

As A. Irving Hallowell writes of Native (in this case Ojibwa) worldviews, "In outward manifestation neither animal nor human characteristics define categorical differences in the core of being."<sup>28</sup> Talking of stones, he explains that the Ojibwa

are not animists in the sense that they dogmatically attribute living souls to inanimate objects . . . [but] the allocation of stones to an animate grammatical category is part of a culturally constituted cognitive "set." It does not involve a consciously formulated theory about the nature of stones. Whereas Euroamericans should never expect a stone to manifest animate properties of any kind under any circumstances, the Ojibwa recognize *a priori* potentialities for animation in certain classes of objects under certain circumstances.<sup>29</sup>

Who, or what, is speaking is very significant in terms of the relations between the speaker and listener, but the category of "things" to which the speaker belongs is not: an animal, other human, ancestor, manifestation of weather, or supernatural agent might necessarily become a member of any category outside of a typical subject-object or person-nonperson relation. A human is not necessarily always the only person who speaks or has agency, wisdom, medicine, and so forth.

It is important to keep in mind that the essential difference in cosmologies that attributes personhood and even deification to wise speaking animals or natural forces sets the conditions of possibility in the Cree ontological schema: what is *possible* is traceable to the origin myths, just as it is for modern Euroamericans. In Canada, as Donald Fixico writes, "The primal relationship between humans and animals dates back to mythical times when both were new members of a

created world. . . . [S]tories about man's relationship with the animal world developed into . . . stories [that] carried forward an oral historical tradition."<sup>30</sup> A possible "entity" may therefore be a speaking bird, or similar, which appears as a source of knowledge (and therefore is epistemologically important), whilst axiologically, the *value* attributed to this entity is derived from an origin myth. An angel speaking to a Christian believer in a dream, or a scientist confirming the chaotic (or synchronistic) nature of the universe in his daily drive to work are perhaps not so dissimilar: in each case, cosmological tenets reinforce the validity of experience, and experience, in turn, reinforces the cosmology.

Such thought experiments as comparing the Christian and the scientist—which may be the same person—can be exercises in *cosmological interrogation*, which requires self-reflexivity when evaluating the truth claims of other peoples relative to one's own. Indeed, the logic of indigenous ways of thinking and seeing the world becomes more comprehensible when they are engaged with openly and comparatively (rather than with mere tolerance or the suspension of disbelief); when they are approached, in short, as a conversation *between* cosmologies, in which differences are made explicit and investigated. The rule of thumb here is to challenge (in very personal terms) any immediate doubt, suspicion, or rejection of what is encountered with a series of questions meant to disclose the basis upon which the rejection is founded—to try to uncover the point at which a key cosmological difference is making translation difficult.<sup>31</sup> Clearly a degree of self-understanding and a willingness to overcome cognitive dissonance must be a part of this "self-help for scholars" process, but this is what hospitality requires. Basic translation difficulties might arise, as they do with literature, but the goal must be to *expand* the host ontology to accommodate the "other" perspective, rather than *reduce* that perspective to Euroamerican understandings, in pursuit of a more nuanced, hospitable, balanced, and ultimately *respectful* translation.

Take historical events, for example. Writing of Navajo ontology, Vincent Crapanzano identifies the language as grammatically processual and dynamic, creating a narrated landscape of interactions which is at once both local and highly abstract: "Where English stresses the verb 'to be,' the Navajo stress the verb 'to go'—*naaghaii* . . . which refers to continually going about and returning. . . . The active verbs [in Navajo] report events . . . movement, or movings . . . conceived very concretely in terms of the movements of corporeal bodies or of entities metaphorically attached to corporeal bodies."<sup>32</sup> By extension, then, anything that can be understood in English as concrete, such as

an historical event, has to be conceptually embedded—in Navajo, but also in other Native languages—in specific places. These events are anchored in such places through human witnesses, but also through nonhuman ones whose experience humans have access to. Ethnographer Keith Basso writes that the landscape acquires value and significance by virtue of socially transmitted systems of meanings which are compatible with shared understandings of how speakers and listeners know themselves to occupy it. Places and objects generate their own fields of meaning which are information-rich, interpreted *in relation-to*, and recorded orally through story, ritual, and song. Language, time and space are therefore interconnected in a holistic and processual *web of relationships*, as opposed to a Euroamerican linear, or static, worldview that privileges subject-object distinctions. Put plainly, the relation between subject and object is not fixed, nor predefined, nor particularly obedient to the categories of subject and object.

In any encounter with Native ethnographies, then—not just in Native American or First Nations contexts but with regard to many indigenous communities—translation has to occur *conceptually*, not just from one language to another, in order for the host ontology to accommodate the new perspective. As soon as we write, think, or speak into English the content of an alternate worldview, we must become hyper-aware of what our casual terms of reference connote at the etymological level and, further, what must be accommodated when transferring foreign concepts into the host ontology.

### Of Speaking Birds: Pretty-Shield's Stories and Chickadee Medicine

"Story," within Native oral traditions, is the foundation of learning and the means of communicating all kinds of cultural experience. As in all oral traditions, the stories of Native American and First Nations peoples are active, and they serve a purpose. They are not simply passive oral libraries, nor are they fiction—they are *medicine*. As Brianna Burke writes, "Native scholars, writers, poets, and elders emphasize that language itself has a physical effect in the world, particularly prayers or ceremonies. Unlike postmodern theorists, who argue that the world and the thing it signifies are irremediably separated, many traditional Native views reflect the belief that words can *make things happen*."<sup>33</sup> In recording the tale of Pretty-shield, Frank Linderman's challenge was to convey, with all seriousness, events that he may have personally thought to be impossible. Perhaps most difficult was reconciling two

kinds of truth: the ethnographer's "fact" as it is represented in the text and codified as "non-fiction," and the storyteller's truth, which has a distinct fact-value of its own.

Native stories can be "true" in that they are thought to possess metaphorical and anagogical meaning without being either literally true or fictional: conversely, there are also stories which did not happen and are not "true," and these *do* conform to our notion of fiction.<sup>34</sup> When stories are medicine, a story's truth is relative to the perceived value or strength of the medicine it contains. What is considered fictional in Native oral traditions is more akin to what is *not important or useful* according to Native ontological conceptions and value structures; and of course there is a wealth of modern Native literature which is considered fiction. Particular kinds of experiences, however, and the life lessons or larger philosophical points for consideration that are transmitted from generation to generation, ordinarily take the form of "true" stories.

Consider Native American and feminist scholar Paula Gunn Allen's account of Linderman's interactions with Pretty-shield, as recounted in her book *Grandmothers of the Light*.<sup>35</sup> As Allen describes it, Pretty-shield calls the chickadee "big medicine," and tells Linderman a tale from her childhood in which her grandmother educates her in the ways of the non-physical world; a fitting introduction to Pretty-shield's future role as a medicine woman.<sup>36</sup> The chickadees in her stories not only converse with the child and her grandmother but issue warnings of danger and make predictions which come to pass.<sup>37</sup> Pretty-shield challenges Linderman directly on this point, calling him "Sign-talker," the name bestowed upon him by the Crow: "'Did the animal-people ever talk to you Sign-talker?'. . . When I told her that I had often understood what my horse or my dog wished me to know, she did not appear to be satisfied. . . . 'But they *do* talk,' she said firmly, half to herself."<sup>38</sup>

Whilst Linderman appears to engage with Pretty-shield on her own terms, and thinks carefully about her question, Allen points out that those raised in a "rationalist" world generally have no room for these explanations of such things; they are commonly thought of as the products of overactive imaginations or mass hysteria.<sup>39</sup> "Yet traditional people insist that conversations with animals or supernaturals—little people, giants, immortals or holy people—are actual," as Allen writes. "To them the world Pretty-Shield describes is the ordinary, the real world. . . . What are called 'myths' in the white world, and thought of as primitive spiritual stories that articulate psychological realities, are in the native world the accounts of actual interchanges. Pretty-shield is

not indirectly articulating hidden and disowned psychological drives. She is telling about actual conversations with some chickadees."<sup>40</sup>

Herein lies the disjunction between two distinct sets of cosmological tenets, the holistic (Native) view and the rationalist (Euroamerican) view, which separates Pretty-shield's accounting of events from subsequent interpretations of it. The medicine contained within Pretty-shield's story, and the opportunity it presents to the listener, is easily obscured as it becomes a matter of record, transmitted and altered by the filters of the ethnologist's worldview. The result is a potentially serious loss of translative power, in both the literary sense common to translation studies and in the cosmo-ontological sense already outlined.<sup>41</sup> This is not to suggest that Linderman somehow corrupted Pretty-shield's narrative, but to make the point that his authorship, and specifically the mediation of Pretty-shield's oral stories through writing and (academic) narrative form, is likely to be incongruent with the Native worldview he wishes to capture and represent. A more extreme view might be that he *cannot* capture it wholly, that every reading of another worldview or culture is necessarily partial, fragmented, and context-specific.

For many who are schooled and socialized in English-dominant, noun-dominant environments, and for whom conversations with other animals are ontologically impossible, stories like Pretty-Shield's may be interpreted *a priori* as myth, fiction, or folktale. Deloria notes that "We are taught to believe from the beginning that animals have no feeling, emotion, or intellect. We assume they function by 'instinct,' but this word only covers up our ignorance of the capabilities of animals."<sup>42</sup> In his example, which relates conversations with a coyote, he is quick to point out that, despite the fact that this claim does not meet the philosophical or scientific requirements of the *Western* world, the existence and validity of his conversation meets all the empirical requirements of the *coyote* world. Ethnographer Paul Nadasdy, in a similar vein, relates a Kluane First Nations view: "Indeed, I was told explicitly more than once that although animals in Kluane country probably cannot speak English, they most definitely can 'speak Indian.'"<sup>43</sup>

Consider the dilemma to the Euroamerican upon learning that Pretty-shield's great-great-grandmother, Seven Stars, is told her future by the chickadees: that she will have three sons but lose two of them and that she must never eat eggs.<sup>44</sup> Is this health advice, life advice, or both? Furthermore, is such a thing even comprehensible to a Euroamerican ear? Or is it to be treated as a delusion, generating a mental note to watch the claimant for further signs of instability? Even when first-hand experience of an everyday occurrence, such as

the widely reported phenomenon of “mother’s intuition,” is useful or transformative, there is a significant collective ontological bias to overwrite experience with “common sense” assertions and denials. As Deloria writes, “The doctrinal exclusion of certain kinds of phenomena by the West has no basis except the superstition that certain things cannot exist.”<sup>45</sup> Hospitality to other worldviews, therefore, begins with interrogating our own cosmological, and thus ontological, presuppositions.

### Hospitality, or Why Truth Matters

Native ways of being are not necessarily bound by the spatial or temporal restrictions that Eurocentric discourses and expectations bring to them. As Deloria explains, “Our ancestors observed nature and perceived sets of relationships in the world. They used obscure correspondences to relate phenomena that appeared to be entirely separate and thereby derived a reasonably predictive knowledge about how the world works. Anomalies interested them and triggered their intuitional abilities.”<sup>46</sup> Hospitality to various Native points of view requires an interest in anomalies, acceptance of the intuitive capacities of human beings, and recognition of the validity of other kinds of knowing or other ways of cosmologically rendering the natural world. Hospitality is part of the motivation for pursuing “good” or “better” translations of indigenous ways of being in the world whilst letting go of the Euroamerican insistence on rigorous classifications and binary thinking. Indeed, Kuokkanen, writing on hospitality, argues that the “silences” generated by scholarship that does not take into account certain metaphysical differences in worldview constitute a new kind of imperialism.<sup>47</sup>

Responsible movement towards not only accepting but understanding the radical alterity presented by Native ontologies, together with comprehensively exposing the ontological precepts generating Euroamerican culture, is critical to any sort of progress in this area. To make visible the ontology of Euroamerican thought and action is the responsibility of all scholars and citizens, not just the indigenous communities who have labored to translate and re-translate their ontological differences from first contact forwards.<sup>48</sup> Native American activist and scholar Barbara Cameron writes that it is not just up to her (and her people) to educate others about issues of race: “It is inappropriate for progressive or liberal white people to expect warriors in brown armor to eradicate racism. There must be co-responsibility from people of color and white people to equally work on this issue.”<sup>49</sup>



Making visible this ontology also means looking squarely at how liminal concepts are bound together in an illicit category of collected, yet marginalized, ways of being. Certain tropes which arise together with racial or ethnic difference, such as superstition, magic, paganism, madness, criminality, sexual difference, and danger, mutually reinforce each other and co-construct the interstitial spaces where poverty, substance abuse, and other problems are silently enabled and justified. To redress this injustice requires cosmological interrogation by individuals in relationship with indigenous peoples, but also that scholars within universities overcome long-standing self-imposed limitations on acceptable kinds of scholarship. Such issues, and the debates surrounding them, have real-world impacts that continue the colonial project in the here and now.

In his work with the Innu of the Labrador-Quebec Peninsula in Canada, for instance, Colin Samson writes of the double bind facing people who live in "two worlds."<sup>50</sup> As with the challenges of modernization faced by Pretty-shield and the Crow Nation a century ago, the Innu are in an impossible situation: the trajectory of progress imposed by the white man's world competes with what it means to be Innu. The borrowings and adaptations made by the Innu (such as snowmobiles) are perceived as a "leap" forward into "successful" living that simultaneously makes them less "authentically indigenous."<sup>51</sup> Samson tells of how a "drunken young Innu man, after beckoning me up to his mother's house, once told me several interconnected stories. . . . Waving his arms towards the window, he said that all the people we saw walking the beach road were *Indians*, those who live in houses, have jobs. . . . The Innu really only lived before 1950. To be an Innu was to be nomadic, to be a hunter."<sup>52</sup> He then recalled a story where he was on the beach, fixing leaks on a canoe, when he was approached by a man. "Tapping the outboard motor, the white man told him that this machinery was not Innu and that he would be dead without it. . . . [The white man's] words paralyzed him. He suddenly felt that he couldn't get up from the ground, as if he should sink into the sand."<sup>53</sup> Samson makes explicit that, by living under the "modes of persuasion and coercion" which amount to success in Euro-Canadian terms, Innu are vulnerable to the charge that they are no longer Innu, becoming white in all but outward appearance.<sup>54</sup>

A fictional account of the violence that results from the unexamined clash of worldviews can be found in the film *Older Than America* (2008), by Plains Cree director Georgina Lightning.<sup>55</sup> Based loosely on her father's life story and his experience of residential schools in



Canada, the story follows a group of contemporary Ojibwa who are coming to terms with the legacies of colonization. Lightning plays Rain, who like her mother before her suffers the reinterpretation of her own medicine—in this case her visions—as a mental illness requiring intervention and shock therapy.<sup>56</sup> The film throws psychiatry into sharp relief as a very effective instrument of control for enforcing racial and religious superiority; it also comments critically on the ethnocidal impacts of the residential school system in Canada. These examples illustrate that it is not just hospitality that is urgent, but actual validation of radically different ways of seeing the world, even if that necessarily entertains the notion of other kinds of being, knowing, and doing. This is where hospitable academic practice could make a real-world difference.

According to scholar and activist Taiaiake Alfred, “Challenging mainstream society to question its own structure, its acquisitive, individualistic value system and the false premises of colonialism is essential if we are to move beyond the problems plaguing all our societies, Native and white, and rebuild relations between our peoples. A deep reading of tradition points to a moral universe in which all of humanity is accountable to the same standard.”<sup>57</sup> Urgent warnings of language death, for instance, are premised on this truth. Finally, for indigenous people the world over, there is simply too much confusion generated by an array of sources of cultural authority and competing moral codes, contributing to increased stigmatization, unprecedented rates of suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, and sexual abuse.<sup>58</sup>

Much of the time, academics consider questions about spirits, dreams, or the agency of chickadees, coyotes, and other animals, but go to great lengths to state that it “doesn’t matter” whether these stories are “true” or not, but only that they are accurate representations of “what people believe.”<sup>59</sup> However, it must matter if the dominant worldview is to be properly queried in areas where it is hegemonic: in areas where ascriptions of cultural relativism simply cannot compete with the abiding authority of the dominant worldview. Truth *matters* in Euroamerican contexts, and to suggest it does not matter, or that truth is “relative” within an indigenous context, appears structurally racist. Real hospitality recognizes relations between cosmologies as key to understanding alterity. As Deloria writes, “You have got to look back into your own culture. . . . [W]hy, after Newton and Darwin, did you grab that one quadrant and say that is what the world is about?”<sup>60</sup>

If the people of the northwest coast of America say that salmon see each other as humans, salmon see humans as bears, and the leaves

on the bottom of the river are seen by humans as salmon, calling this a “claim” delegitimizes the entire worldview of a people.<sup>61</sup> These are not “articles of faith” or quaint cultural beliefs.<sup>62</sup> Stories and lifeways are *medicine*, and it is through them that worldviews remain salient; they are insurance against “losing the eyes,” a metaphor for the understanding and worldview embedded within the stories that are passed on through the generations.<sup>63</sup> What is seen to be is multiplied through many eyes into *what is*—or as the late indigenous philosopher, Viola F. Cordova, sums up, *how it is*: “I exist only in and as a context. I am what that context has created. I did not burst full bloom into the world I confront.”<sup>64</sup> My “stories” are not “myths,” Cordova insists.<sup>65</sup> They are a part of lived human experience that has legitimacy equivalent with every other worldview.

The lived experience of an indigenous worldview exists as more than can be contained within any paradigm insistent upon contradiction. It must be engaged with as an holistic and multisensory engagement with the world *as it is*; as it appears in the moment. Hallowell quotes a beautiful anecdote that illustrates how we might understand a little better what Cordova is saying: “An informant told me that many years before he was sitting in a tent on a summer afternoon during a storm together with an old man and his wife. There was one clap of thunder after another. Suddenly, the old man turned to his wife and asked, ‘Did you hear what was said?’ ‘No,’ she replied, ‘I didn’t catch it.’”<sup>66</sup>

Other times, thunder is just *thunder*.

## NOTES

I would like to thank Anne Scott, Andrew Sepie, Ashley Reed, and Kelly L. Bezio for their insights, comments, and contributions to this paper.

1. Brody, *Maps and Dreams*, 44.

2. Lear, *Radical Hope*, 80.

3. In this paper, I use the terms First Nations, Aboriginal, Indian, American Indian, Amerindian, Indigenous Native American, and so on as they have appeared in source material and as appropriate. All terms are in reference to those of Aboriginal ancestry within the land mass divided into the North Canadian Arctic region, Canada, and the Americas and who identify under any of these terms. Where examples are taken from various local traditions, they are used with due deference to the integrity of that particular tradition, though they may simultaneously be somewhat merged within this narrative in order to make a broader point about collective indigenous experiences. I follow Native American activist Russell Means in a distinction made in his famous July 1980 speech to the Black Hills International Survival Gathering in the Black Hills of South Dakota, in which he stated that *all* terms, other than precise tribal names, are European in origin, and therefore insufficient. See Means, *For America To Live*.

4. Notable contributors to this lineage are far too numerous to list, but the tradition is generally thought to begin with Antonio Gramsci, whose work on hegemony continues within the work of multiple scholars cited here.

5. "Linderman occasionally revealed sensitivity about his lack of academic credentials. Once, he complained that professors knew only what they had learned from books, while his own knowledge and credibility rested on his experiences and relationships with Indian people" (Smith, *Reimagining Indians*, 109).

6. Originally published as *Red Mother* (1932).

7. Colasurdo, "Tell Me a Woman's Story," 391.

8. Linderman, *Pretty-Shield*, 128.

9. Swann, *Born in the Blood*, 4.

10. Kuokkanen, *Reshaping the University*.

11. *Ibid.*, 3.

12. Colasurdo, 385.

13. Paula Gunn Allen writes: "It is difficult if not impossible . . . to speak coherently about myth because the term has been so polluted by popular misuse . . . . Popular among Americans, *myth* is synonymous with *lie* . . . . Indeed, terms such as *pagan*, *tribal*, and *poetic* . . . imply ignorance, backwardness, and foolishness . . . ; such terms as 'alleged,' 'determinable,' 'factual,' and 'natural explanation' imply falsity or, at least, questionable accuracy" (Allen, *Sacred Hoop*, 102–3).

14. Gill, "Academic Study of Religion," 967. Furthermore, "The heritage for the academic study of small-scale exclusively oral peoples is deeply rooted in the nineteenth century evolutionist studies in which the cultures then labeled 'primitive' were sought for evidence of religion-in-the-making or the ur-religious or the original monotheism" (Gill, 970).

15. Weaver, *That the People Might Live*, vii.

16. Scott, "Science for the West, Myth for the Rest?" 72.

17. Peat, *Blackfoot Physics*, 128.

18. As Christianity and science grew up together, so to speak, what became invisible in the modern scientific enterprise was a set of cosmological understandings, hierarchical notions, and philosophical precepts derived directly from Christianity. To borrow from Peter Berger, there are certain "plausibility structures" which were transferred directly into modern secular society, among them, a Christian moral code with an absolute authority at the helm. Berger, *Sacred Canopy*; see also Morton, "Invisible Episteme."

19. George Tinker, quoted in Weaver, "From I-Hermeneutics to We-Hermeneutics," 11. Recent and innovative texts on translation and culture theories include those by Allen and Bernofsky, *In Translation*; Apter, *Translation Zone*; Gambier and van Doorslaer, *Metalanguage of Translation*; Gracia, *Texts*; Rubel and Rosman, *Translating Cultures*; Mauranen and Kujamaki, *Translation Universals*.

20. Some key texts on the relations between translation, language, and indigenous worldviews include Mark et al., *Landscape in Language*; King, *Truth About Stories*; Filipovic and Jaszczolt, *Space and Time*; Kelsey, *Tribal Theory*; Krupat, *Voice in the Margin*.

21. Martinez, "Medicine Way," 2.

22. *Ibid.*

23. Peat, 128.

24. Glaskin, "Anatomies of Relatedness," 298.

25. Scott, 72.

26. *Ibid.*, 72–73.

27. See also Mlekuz, "'Sheep Are Your Mother.'"

28. Hallowell, "Ojibwa Ontology," 34.

29. *Ibid.*, 24.

30. Fixico, *American Indian Mind*, 54.

31. This method is derived in part from the suggestions of Martin Holbraad and his call for ontological interrogation (as detailed in his ethnography *Truth in Motion*).

32. Crapanzano, *Imaginative Horizons*, 32, 35–36.

33. Brianna Burke argues that “the belief that language has a physical effect is still integral to Indigenous religions across this country” (“On Sacred Ground,” 18).

34. See Von Gunten-Guidry, “The Experience of Knowing.”

35. Allen, *Grandmothers of the Light*.

36. *Ibid.*, 4.

37. “Stories and facts do not naturally keep a respectable distance; indeed they promiscuously cohabit the same very material places” (Haraway, *Modest\_Witness*, 68).

38. Linderman, *Pretty-Shield*, 66.

39. Allen, *Grandmothers of the Light*, 5.

40. *Ibid.*, 5–6.

41. Linderman himself was aware of this. According to Hertha Wong, Linderman acknowledged that his work would probably “suffer mutation,” though he insisted that his interpreter, Goes-Together, was conscientious (*Sending My Heart Back*, 98).

42. Deloria, Jr., “Philosophy and the Tribal Peoples,” 7.

43. Nadasdy, “The Gift in the Animal,” 34.

44. Allen, *Grandmothers of the Light*, 5.

45. Deloria, Jr., “Philosophy and the Tribal Peoples,” 7. Furthermore, he notes that: “Many Indian people are leaving their culture and traditions in ways they do not suspect. They are developing a schizophrenia. They look at their grandfather, who goes out and talks with birds and coyotes, and they think he is superstitious” (*Spirit and Reason*, 228).

46. *Ibid.*, 11.

47. See Kuokkanen.

48. Brianna Burke writes “that indigenous people have had to translate everything into western ideology for far too long, and it time for non-Native readers to made the journey in the opposite direction, with a translator and guide” (20).

49. Cameron, “Gee, You Don’t Seem Like an Indian from the Reservation,” 51.

50. Samson, “Colonial Double-Bind,” 129.

51. *Ibid.*, 130.

52. *Ibid.*, 130–31.

53. *Ibid.*

54. *Ibid.*, 131.

55. Lightning, *Older Than America*.

56. This is not limited to Native American and First Nations contexts. Melissa Taitimu, writing on Maori interactions with the mental health system, states that “When viewed through an indigenous lens, experiences labeled schizophrenic by Western psychiatry have been found to vary from culture to culture in terms of content, meaning and outcome” (Taitimu [Te Rarawa], *Nga Whatkwhitinga*, i). For extensive coverage of this issue in a local context, see Kirmayer and Valaskakis, *Healing Traditions*; Robin et al., “Schizophrenia and Psychotic Symptoms.”

57. Quoted in Fixico, 36.

58. For a review of these issues, see Kirmayer and Valaskakis.

59. As Nadasdy observes, “most anthropologists . . . generally maintain that we do not need to (indeed, should not) adopt the beliefs of the people we study to theorize about those beliefs . . . to personally believe that animals are intelligent and spiritually powerful beings who consciously give themselves to hunters” (34).

60. Deloria, Jr. et al., *Spirit and Reason*, 229.

61. Guedon, “An Introduction to the Tsimshian World View.” The notion of “claim,” when ascribed to indigenous statements of fact, appears as a concession similar to a religious claim: it is *a priori* “false,” but we are obliged to entertain or

tolerate it. To entertain these ideas seriously would require a rethinking of the basic metaphysical assumptions which underpin Euroamerican ways of thinking and being.

62. See Deloria, Jr. et al., *Spirit and Reason*, 223–29.

63. This is a reference to the story of Coyote losing his eyes through disrespecting the authority of the Rabbit, who possessed bigger medicine than he. Sto:lo scholar Jo-Ann Archibald links this story to the legacy of forced colonization and assimilation during the residential school years in Canada, and re-education within the public school systems, which has threatened the Native Canadian sense of keeping “eyes on the world” and challenged their ability to maintain an indigenous perspective (*Indigenous Storywork*, 13).

64. Cordova and Moore, *How It Is*, 49.

65. *Ibid.*, 40.

66. Hallowell, 33.

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